

Οι Γλώσσες του Φύλου
The Languages of Gender

Limoge, *Our* Women, and Other Colonial Metaphors

Julian Vigo

Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa*, contains one of the greatest moments of cinema Kitsch in which Karen Blixen, played by Meryl Streep, ships her personal effects from Europe across Kenya to her coffee plantation. After having her "servants" carry these effects "casually" about (large wooden crates which look as if they weigh at least 150 kilos), Blixen worries about them breaking the French porcelain inside these crates and thus cautioning them to be careful, she admonishes them with the famous words: "My limoge!" Certainly this film, inasmuch as it attempts to critique colonialist attitudes towards the very silent—and all too often absent—African others in this film, ends up romanticizing the concomitant plot, bringing the spectator into Kenya and somehow legitimizing all those dark bodies which carry about tea, cocktails and other objects in the backdrop, as the setting for what this film is really about: "white romance" in a colonialist setting. As much as Pollack's Oscar winning film has been lauded for its critique of colonialism, it does not take much scrutiny to see how this narrative inevitably critiques a quite colonial attitude regarding the invisibility, ownership and even reform of other bodies. In the film Robert Redford's character, Denys Finch, remarks upon such real and discursive "ownership" as Blixen announces that she wishes her servant to be educated: "I want *my* Kiku to learn to read." Redford's response: "My Kiku. My Limoge. My farm. It's an awful lot to own, isn't it?" Indeed, Pollack brought to Hollywood the ideal that one can critique Europe's colonialist past while blissfully creating romance in between the ideological differences, ultimately legitimating the very structures and ethos of colonialism. After all, this film authenticates that Western values promote subjectivity, happiness and love while diametrically showing that African values are merely the silent, obscure objects of Western desire.

Years away from Pollock's 1985 film, while living in Italy during the U.S. led invasion of

Afghanistan in 2001, I was shocked by the overwhelming support for the military action amongst Americans I met. One person was offended because I forwarded an article to her regarding the legislation in the United States which proved corrosive to the U.S. Constitution. And another told me that she did not wish to discuss or even question the war and then suddenly turned to me and asked, "But, what do you think about how the Taliban treat *their* women?" Stunned by the discursive break that this person demonstrated by simultaneously separating and collapsing the politics of feminism and war, I realized that my interlocutor had legitimized the US sponsored aggression in Afghanistan through a very colonizing pseudo-feminist interpretation. Her ideological model of "freedom" was none other than that of a Western archetype where women freely roam the streets and show any part of their body as evidence to this freedom, versus a mediated spectacle of Afghan society in which women have no voice, no autonomy, no rights. I was reminded of Karen Blixen's "limoge", for as I entered into that conversation, I learned that my interlocutor's ideological model of "freedom" was none other than that of a Western archetype. Likewise, her understanding of the Taliban, much less any other culture in the Far or Mid East, was about as comprehensive as that of Karen Blixen's abstraction of her servant, "*her* Kiku".

In a perverse way, women's rights have come to play a central—albeit covert—role in legitimizing indirectly the recent new "wars" against terrorism, first in Afghanistan and soon thereafter in Iraq. Many articles in American leftist journals and newspapers, for instance, attempted to vindicate or pardon the "war" in Afghanistan as if this conflict had a deeper agenda which both intrinsically and symbolically addressed women's rights in this region. For many liberal Americans in 2001, the moral questions of their government's actions in the "war" in Afghanistan and the larger "war on terror" could have ostensibly been forgiven (or even forgotten) if only the West could have harnessed the "savagery" of the Taliban and could have diverted such "human rights abuses" into something tamer, radically different, and more democratic. All this apparently under the Northern Alliance, a group about whom most Americans have as much knowledge as they do their predecessors, the Taliban. And as such, the transcendental model for such changes in women's freedoms is, of course, the Western one —where democracy flourishes, where women have equal rights, and where this is evidenced by women who have the choice to work, to drive, to educate themselves, and even to go unveiled in American society. Well, given such choices how can anyone possibly say "no" to such liberties? How can one even question Western ideals given such a fanfare of opportunity and democracy accompanied by so little interrogation about the very ideals most Americans uphold as "freer" and "better"?

What is missing however, in most every single critique I have ever read to date on this subject is any form of a *real* dialogue about what "women's rights" in the Arab world implicate? For "women's rights" are simply not ideals that are transmutable and intractable, nor are they monuments which are interchangeable from one culture to the next. Women's freedoms are neither masts which we ought to uphold for other cultures to mimic and embody, nor gradients against which other cultures ought to compete. Women's rights are the very substance of specific and current social debates taking place within the nexus of cultures both locally and globally in: classrooms, meeting halls, kitchens, cafés, Internet chatrooms, newspapers, television, cinemas and on the street. Women's rights are not homogeneous, but are polysemous and they are most certainly different from culture to culture because the very locus, history, and participants of such dialogues are never the same. And what we can never forget is that women's rights are inextricably intertwined with the rights of their male compatriots, many of whom also suffe—other or similar oppressions—in different ways. Yet, such arguments are also elided in the current allure of war and Western feminist propaganda. Hence, when someone from the United States turns to me and asks, "What do you think of how the Taliban treat *their* women?" I am left with few responses that are not already presupposed—assumed really—by the very colonial pretenses of such a question.

I suppose I should now take a moment here to state that I would never choose to wear the *burqa*. Or perhaps, I should even add that I think that Afghan women ought be allowed to choose whether or not to wear the *burqa*. However, as a Western woman these are facile judgements to make. For me to say that I would never choose to veil myself is about as easy a statement to make as for my Hindu grandmother to say that she will never eat a Big Mac. To take another culture and make judgements about what "we" would or would not do has little value outside of our own society and ethics. This is, after all, the very basis of colonial thought: that *we* can teach the *other* to live "better" by making the other, in essence, (look and behave) more "like us" while maintaining a total disregard for that culture and people. For this reason, I am neither addressing the "morality" of the *burqa* here, nor am I vituperating the crimes taking place upon women who are found in violation of these laws (not to mention the many men who likewise suffer from similarly restrictive laws). Quite frankly, this dynamic is all too familiar as it is part of the problem that many countries, such as Afghanistan, have faced for decades: one international intervention after another—often quite violent interventions—which ultimately bring on more political, economic and cultural instability.

How can we dialogue about this terrain called "women's rights" in the Arabo-Islamic world when the questions being asked are formulated and executed by Western subjects *against*

non-Western objects, based entirely upon Western—even very American—ideals of cultural, political and economic freedoms? Such an exchange sounds more like colonialism and an *en masse* implementation of judgements, not at all the "stuff" of dialogue. For in any debate questions and answers alike must come from both sides, just as all parties must be willing to concur that often answers are not easily delivered, if even to be agreed upon. Lamentably, the polemics of Western subjects interrogating non-Western objects about women's rights evidences a moralizing in which the Western subject speaks from a position of "enlightenment" while the veiled, secluded other (as is inevitably represented in Western media) is always the object of such attempted "conversions". Yet the knowledge and political activism regarding women's oppression in the West is certainly not to be understated and demands equal attention when analyzing the terrain for discussing women's freedoms today.

For instance, in February 1999, Italy's highest appeals court threw out a rape conviction on the basis that it was "impossible" for Carmine Cristiano to rape an 18 year-old woman because she was wearing tight jeans. This decision drew attention to the insoluble contradictions of women's rights exemplifying the violation of women's bodies as a serious legal and social phenomenon. Such judgements systematically undergird a societal unconscious which subjects women's bodies to certain comportment, scrutiny and ultimately, future acts of violence. These legal rulings inevitably underline the cultural myth that women—not their aggressors—are empirically responsible for any and all violences besieging them and as such women—not rapists—are made the objects of critique. Similarly, this is the case with Touria Tiouli, a 39 year-old businesswoman from Limoges, France of Moroccan origin who had been held in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, since 15 October, 2002 when she went to the police to denounce the three men whom she claimed raped her the night before. Instead of having her charges filed, Ms. Tiouli was handcuffed, imprisoned for five days and charged with "adulterous sexual relations" and for making a "false rape accusation" since the accused rapists claim she was a voluntary "participant". Media responses worldwide appeared immediately and the overwhelming embrace of this issue made Ms. Tiouli a familiar Western fetish in 2002-2003: yet another Muslim woman as the "oppressed victim" of Islam. This image has become a *Leitmotif* in the West as non-Western women's injustices have come to represent all that is "good" with Western constructions of "women's liberation" and "woman as liberated". Yet, while the United States' "anti-terror" campaign in Afghanistan had ostensibly "freed" Afghan women from the *burqa* according to media reports, the closest the West would get to an intercultural dialogue about Afghan women has been the repeated publications on the "*burqa*" and improper translations of words like "*madrasa*" (ie. a *madrasa* is *not* a terrorist training school). The media

had not focussed upon the facts of Ms. Tiouli's rape or legal rights, but instead obsessed over Ms. Tiouli's "being judged by the *Shariaʾh*" suggesting, in the end, that Muslim fundamentalism, not several violent men, is the cause of this tragedy.

Interestingly, the media attention given to Ms. Tiouli's case suggests that women's rights have become metaphors for measuring the modernity and democracy of cultures ultimately calling into question the very foundation and validity of each society. For instance, in "'Gang Rape' Victim Faces Jail on Adultery Charges" (*Telegraph*, January 3, 2003), Philip Delves Broughton discusses Ms. Tiouli's case writing, "*Shariaʾh* law is applied with varying severity in many Muslim countries". Not only does the journalist never disclose this "varying severity" but indeed it is clear from this sentence that the writer has absolutely no idea what *Shariaʾh* is. The body of Islamic law that governs the daily affairs of Muslims, much like the civil and criminal codes of Western cultures, *Shariaʾh* draws its authority from several primary sources: the *Qurʾan*, *Sunnah* (the actions of the Prophet), *Hadith* (collections of the words and deeds of the Prophet), *Ijma* (consensus of juridic opinion) and *Qiyas* (reason by deduction). As such, Islam actually has more "secular" influence in its legal domain than Christianity allowed in the West. Yet, every article concerning Ms. Tiouli mentions the *Shariaʾh* as if rape were not recognized by this law. Both Article 354 of the Federal Penal Code of the Emirates as well as *Shariaʾh* define rape as a serious crime punishable by death. Clearly, the problem of Ms. Tiouli's rape lies neither in *Shariaʾh* nor federal laws. As Zaki Badawi, a leading Islamic scholar in London, maintains the problem of Ms. Tiouli's rape is not with the *Shariaʾh* but with "the tradition and custom of looking down upon women." Instead of worrying about the *Shariaʾh*, we ought to discuss women's issues in the world and domestically without pitting a moralizing Western ethos of freedom against the ostensibly "undeveloped" and "oppressive" values of non-Western cultures.

But this is the orientalist trap, is it not? The West has a compulsion of looking at how others treat "their women" while forgetting its own recent history *and present* of abuses against women right here in West. We must look to Ms. Tiouli's case as a challenge to our own systems that have treated women with similar institutionalized misogyny. Mary Koss, a psychologist at the University of Arizona, has spent her career researching legal decisions in the United States that have allowed rapists to be acquitted because the victim was "provocatively dressed in a turtleneck and knee-length skirt". In one study, "Sexual Experiences Survey", Koss concluded: "Rape represents an extreme behavior but one that is on a continuum with normal male behavior within the culture". It is only recently that wife rape is illegal in the United States, but then "date rape" is still not recognized in all fifty US states. Other examples of violence against women in

the West are numerous. In Victoria, Australia in 1992 (R v Hakopian), the Supreme Court upheld a 1981 ruling that men who rape prostitutes are entitled to a lighter sentence than that for "other types of" rapes since: "[I]t...is not as heinous as when committed, say, on a happily married woman living in a flat in the absence of her husband when the miscreant breaks in and commits rape on her" (*R v. Harris* 1981: 6-7). And in 1993, the case of *People v. Murphy*, the [male] rape victim's case was thrown back to a lower court because the determination that the victim was gay "cancelled out" his having been raped. Also, there is the highly publicized Brandon Teena case in the United States, just one of many examples of the law not properly recognizing rape, as in the many of untried rape cases in the U.S. prison system which is estimated by the FBI to be over 89,000—double this number for the rape of men in prisons (1999). Given the evidence that women's rights in the West are far from paradise, it would seem the West's obsession with Muslim women, is really not at all about understanding or "bettering" women's rights abroad whatsoever.

Analysis of Western media representations of Touria Tiouli evidences a conscious elision of women in the very discussions which are ostensibly about them. For instance, in "Rape in Islam: Blaming the Victim" (*Front Page Magazine*, 23. 01.2003), Robert Spencer accuses Edward Said of exonerating Muslim cultures for the crimes committed against women, referring to the case of Touria Tiouli: "For *Sharia'h* courts all over the Islamic world seem only too willing to reinforce the stereotypes of Islam that Said deplores, particularly where women are concerned." Unfortunately, Spencer painfully exposes his incredibly racist concepts of the Muslim world and Islamic faith, ultimately embodying the very orientalism he attempts to critique. To hold Touria Tiouli's tragedy up as the model for understanding 20% of the earth's population is to insult the hundreds of millions of Muslim women and men who have worked to advance notions of humanity and equality. (Would Mr. Spencer use Brandon Teena as the archetype for women's rights in the US?) Had he attempted to study his subject at all, Spencer would have found that issues of women's legal rights and social freedoms have been at the core of cultural and political debates in Muslim societies for centuries beginning with the *Qur'an* which set out to bestow women rights that denied by Judaism and Christianity (ie. inheritance, property rights, divorce and alimony). Since 1900, Qasim Amin, Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Halide Edib Adivar, Damia Benkhouya, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebbar, Leila Ahmed and Moufida Tlatli are just some of the hundreds of writers, filmmakers, philosophers and politicians who have maintained these dialogues.

Thus, while Spencer proposes that "orientalist clichés" of women lie within the *Sharia'h*, Fatima Mernissi turns the tables on such arguments contending that women's rights do not

conflict with Islam but rather with “the interests of a male elite" into which both men and women are inscribed.[1] Mernissi’s study on the *hijab* analyses not only how the act of veiling came about in Jahiliya (pre-Muslim) and Muslim societies, but she demonstrates how the division of private/ public became one of male/female:

> If we look again at the facts scattered throughout this chapter, it comes down to saying that the Prophet, during a troubled period at the beginning of Islam, pronounced a verse that was so exceptional and determining for the Muslim religion that it introduced a breach in space that can be understood to be a separation of the public from the private, or indeed the profane from the sacred, but which was to turn into a segregation of the sexes (p. 101).

Ultimately Mernissi demonstrates that such conflicts and “male elite” are not limited to Islamic societies. Similarly, Leila Ahmed has demonstrated that during colonialism the Victorian male “establishment”, while eliding domestic feminist claims, was busy redirecting this very language of oppression to the colonies such that Lord Cromer, British consul general of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, advocated the unveiling of women, arguing against such “inferior” cultural practices. Indeed it would seem that Spencer thinks himself in a position to judge *Sharia'h* as inferior, while ironically he comes from a country, the United States, which struggles with serious social problems of rape (in 1999, for instance, 383,000 civilian rapes were reported, *U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Statistics, 2000*). Ultimately, the exploitation of non-Western rape as a means of demonstrating Western “supremacy” evidences a neo-colonial spirit whose sole objectives are clear: the discursive control of women’s bodies and rights; the convenient elision of domestic women’s issues; and a blissful imposition of Western assumptions of freedom upon non-Western peoples and cultures. So where Italians are told not to wear jeans, women in the United Arab Emirates are told not to take rides from strangers. Such “lessons” are the patriarchal ghosts of history against which women everywhere must fight. What Robert Spencer and much of Western media bring to this argument, however, is the romantic image of the Western agent rushing over to open up the door to save us all. Sound familiar?

Western feminism when cut and pasted onto a Muslim context, becomes the most colonial of practices where, for instance, writers such as Barbara Ehrenreich write about the

[1] Mernissi writes that the *hiab* was first referenced in the koran as a separation between men, as propriety: “The verse of the *hijab* descended in the bedroom of the wedded pair to protect their intimacy and exclude a third person—in this case, Anas Ibn Malik, one of the Prophet’s Companions. Anas was excluded by the *hijab* as a witness and the symbol of a community that had become too invasive, and it was this witness himself who reported the event...’He put one foot in the room and kept the other outside. It was in this position that he let fall a *sitr* [curtain] between himself and me, and the verse of the *hijab* descended at that moment’.” (p. 86).

"Taliban's Hatred of Women" (*Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2001) without so much as looking at the plethora of information which establishes that the treatment of women was no better under the Northern Alliance or *mujahadeen*. Ehrenreich also views the *burqa* in terms of "misogyny", completely missing any specific socio-cultural motives for which this garb might have been implemented, spending much of the article "risking speculation" as she states. She he makes no effort to understand the specifics of the Afghan situation for the past two decades as her article is a compilation of generalizations about the Muslim and "Third world", as well as about men on a global scale. It is interesting to note that Ehrenreich's critique would have been quite astute had she even strayed into Afghanistan, historically or culturally, instead of limiting her argument to other "Third World" paradigms. Moreover, had she come to study her subject a bit more carefully, Ehrenreich might have noticed that many women such as those most closely aligned to Western feminist agendas such as RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) have as much disdain for the Taliban as they do for the even more horrendous groups preceding them, such as the Northern Alliance or the Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan, due to the atrocities they forced upon women between 1992 and 1996 which are well documented. Hence, the very question of the *burqa* has become quite a tokenized symbol for Western feminist polemics while the foundation for its implementation goes all but unexamined. We must ask ourselves if we are even predisposed to consider that a woman might possibly be "free" *while choosing to wear* any sort of head/body covering, be it *hijab*, *burqa* or *chadoor*?

Immediately after the September 11th terrorist attacks bookstores around Italy created these "mini-terrorist" sections within the store architecture: a section, usually near the entrace, devoted to Islam, terrorism and women's rights, separated and highlighted with special signs "Terrorism" "Women and Islam", as if these books hold the hermetic solutions to the "whys" of September 11th. Moreover, the covers of these books containing the words "Islam" or "Muslim" were all so familiarly problematic as they showed a variation of these three popular images: the World Trade Center burning; the Jesus-like picture of Osama bin Laden either smiling or staring off in an angle with; and finally, women in veils of all sorts, colors and shapes, with titles such as "Sold!", "I will Save You!" and "Slaves". I was shocked by this sudden shift towards what I term Islamophobia-filia (the love of demonizing Islam) because there was no attempt to hide what was an institutionalized pronouncement on Muslims, an institutionalized and societal embrace of racism against all things Muslim. Likewise, there was this subtle parallel being constructed in the mainstream publishing industry as within the media at large: that somehow the same "backwardness" which would lead a culture to veil *its* women would inevitably lead to terrorism.

There is a clear agenda in the West which aligns "backwardness" and "servitude" to those who choose to wear the *hijab*, and a certain "modernity" and "freedom" [sic Westernism] is attributed to those who do not wear any such garb. More disturbing however, are the parallels being drawn between "democracy" and non-veiled bodies versus the veiled, "kidnapped" body of the women: the veiled bodies are unilaterally placed on the same discursive terrain as that of violent fundamentalist terrorists. There is a familiar message with Western women's rights agendas here to be read on a global scale of solidarity or refusal to conform to the non-contractual limits of women's freedoms: "you are either with us or you are against us".

Equally problematic is the underside to current debates about why "*they* treat *their* women the way they do"—or rather, the curious lack of introspective study regarding Western culture's treatment of *its own* women. But then, what are we to expect from a cultural "dialogue" whereby the Western subject remains imperially bound to certain inalienable truths regarding its own concepts of women's freedom, much less any type of freedom? For instance, in speaking with Americans, it is painfully clear that most tend to think that American women have more rights than any other women on the planet. That is, until they get pregnant whereby they risk losing their job and have absolutely no right to take a paid maternity leave. ("The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993" provides a total of 12 work weeks of *unpaid* leave during any 12-month period for the birth of a child and the care of the newborn applying only to companies with 50 or more workers.) These issues are *quid pro quo* paradigms which are ideologically loaded on both sides with evidence and testimonials from many. When discussing the Talilban, why not ponder the statistics for rape in the United States which in 1999 alone was 876,000 (US Center for Disease Control and Prevention)? Now imagine that these figures represent only the 30 per cent of rape *which is reported*. These are neither a small figures, nor are these incidents negligible as somehow "lesser" injustices than the *burqa* or other atrocities committed against women in other parts of the world. Yet, somehow Western media and feminists alike jump on the "*burqa* bandwagon" as it were, vituperating women's rights in Afghanistan and attempting to displace very Western imperatives upon quite non-Western bodies.

In order for there to be any constructive dialogue regarding women's rights we must first understand that there are different problems facing women from one society to the next and often those problems are not only plaguing women alone, but these issues are often problems beleaguering men and women alike. Indeed, the Taliban's torture and even rape of men goes without much discussion. (Perhaps, there is a certain Western chivalrous discourse at work here that would decry the state of women's rights abroad while leaving the men to fend for

themselves?) We must ask why and how it is that women suffer oppression quite diversely than men and what are, exactly, the socio-political mechanisms that treat women differently, if not less equally. There is a lot of work to do; however, there are simply no easy answers, no clearly universally democratic solutions. But there are more constructive and immediate methods for looking at the broader and more specific instances of women's oppression than merely superimposing Western ideals of liberty over very specific, local notions of freedom and culture. For as I write this article, I cannot pretend that my government is not enacting a certain oppression upon Afghani and Iraqi women (and men) in the name of "freedom". Do the pilots in those planes really see (or care) if the women below are wearing *burqa* or *hijab*? Or does this type of oppression not figure in this strategy? On the other hand, if we really push our conceptual limits here, we might actually make ourselves believe that all the destruction our terrorism is amassing can bring about *our* democratic liberation of women in Afghanistan and Iraq alike! After all, our democracy, our freedom, our women: it is an awful lot to own, isn't it?

Bibliography

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate.* New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992

Broughton, Philip Delves. "'Gang Rape' Victim Faces Jail on Adultery Charges." *Telegraph*, January 3, 2003.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Taliban's Hatred of Women" *Los Angeles Times*. 4 November, 2001.

Koss, Mary and Cheryl Oros, "Sexual Experiences Survey: A Research Instrument Investigating Sexual Aggression and Victimization," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 50, no. 3 (1982): 455.

La Guardia, Anton. "This Has Nothing to do with Our Law". *The Telegraph.* 02 January, 2003.

Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland. New York: Addison-Weslely Publishing Company, 1991.

Out of Africa. Dir. Sydney Pollack. 1985.

Spencer, Robert. "Rape in Islam: Blaming the Victim." *Front Page Magazine*, 23. 01.2003.